

WESTMINSTER IMPROVEMENTS AND  
THE WESTMINSTER REVIEW.

In our leading article of March 15th (p. 121 ante), we drew attention to the lethargy of the Metropolitan Improvement Commission, and certain defects in the plan sanctioned by them for the improvement of Westminster; and we described some plans emanating from the Metropolitan Improvement Society, wherein by a slight deviation from the intended line and the sacrifice of an old workhouse, the abbey was brought into view; the roadway was continued round the south side of the abbey, leaving the cloisters untouched, and terminating with the Victoria Tower of the new Houses of Parliament.

These latter were afterwards submitted to the commissioners; but they declined to reopen the question, considering themselves pledged to the plan now before the House; and unless some effort be made, the new road will be formed so as to shut out the abbey and render its isolation unlikely for many years to come. The same society proposed a road from Buckingham-palace to the new Houses of Parliament, which would dovetail admirably with their proposed Westminster line, and is imperatively required, and by which the Victoria Tower would be visible at the palace gates. If the Westminster plan now adopted be carried out, this important improvement will be entirely prevented.

In a very interesting article on Old and New London, that appears in the present number of the *Westminster Review* (for June), and to which we may have occasion to refer again on other ground, there are some remarks on the subjects that may be usefully circulated, and we accordingly transfer them to our columns.

"The site of Westminster Abbey was, in the Roman time, an island formed by a branch of the Thames, and a stream from the uplands, called the Ty-bourne. It was a wild place, overrun with thorns, and was hence called Thorney Island; the name it still retains in old writings."

The ground, in the course of centuries, has been considerably raised, but a large portion of the district, where the old streams flowed, is still below the level of high-water. The first church, or *Minster*, erected here, was called the *West Minster*, from its being situated to the west of London.

Nothing is known with certainty of the history of any buildings in Thorney Island at the period alluded to by the old monk, when he said: 'the suburbs of Thorney offer incense to Apollo.' A church or an abbey was undoubtedly built about the seventh century, and according to Fleto, by Sebert, King of the East Saxons, and nephew of Ethelbert; instigated to the work by Mellitus, Bishop of London. The account of its dedication is fabulous, but not more so than that of a thousand other churches; and is curious as characteristic of the times.

'It was to be dedicated to St. Peter, and the preparations were already made for that august ceremony, when, according to the relation of several writers whose fidelity we leave our readers to judge of, the apostle himself appeared on the opposite bank of the Thames, and requested a fisherman to take him over. There he was desired to wait while St. Peter, accompanied with an innumerable host from heaven singing choral hymns, performed the ceremony of dedication to himself; the church, meanwhile, being lighted up by a supernatural radiance. On the return of St. Peter to the astonished fisherman, he quieted the latter's alarm, and announced himself in his proper character, bidding him at the same time go to Mellitus at day-break, to inform him of what had passed, and to state that, in corroboration of his story, the bishop would find marks of the consecration on the walls of the edifice. To satisfy the fisherman, he ordered him to cast his nets into the river, and present one of the fish he should take to Mellitus; he also told him that neither he nor his brethren

should want fish so long as they presented a tenth to the church just dedicated, and then suddenly disappeared. The fisherman threw his nets, and, as might have been expected, found a miraculous draught consisting of the finest salmon. When Mellitus, in pursuance of the apostle's mandate, went to examine the church, he found marks of the extinguished tapers, and of the chrism. Mellitus, in consequence, contented himself with the celebration of mass. We may smile now at such a story, but there is no doubt whatever that for ages it obtained general credence. Six centuries after, a dispute took place between the convent and the parson of Rotherhithe, the former claiming a tenth of all the salmon caught in the latter's parish, on the express ground that St. Peter had given it to them; eventually a compromise was agreed to for a twentieth. Still later, or towards the close of the fourteenth century, it appears fishermen were accustomed to bring salmon to be offered on the high altar; the donor on such occasions having the privilege of sitting at the convent table to dinner, and demanding ale and bread from the cellarer.'

The abbey was rebuilt by Edward the Confessor in the eleventh century, a short time prior to the foundation of old St. Paul's. A portion of the Confessor's building still remains in the Pix-office,\* and adjoining parts against the east cloister and south transept; but the greater part of the existing abbey was erected by Henry III., about the year 1250.

Henry the Seventh's Chapel was commenced January 1503; but was still unfinished when Henry died in 1509. In his will, in which provision was made for the completion of the chapel, he names the Prior of St. Bartholomew, Smithfield, as 'the master of the works.'

Henry the Seventh's Chapel is the *chef-d'œuvre* of decorative architecture. In its construction, to use the words of Washington Irving, 'stone seems by the cunning labours of the chisel to have been robbed of its weight and density, suspended aloft, as if by magic; and the fretted roof achieved with the wonderful minuteness and airy security of a cobweb.' But we need not comment upon a work of which the exquisite beauty is acknowledged; we seek only to interest the reader in its preservation, and to shew its connection, at the present moment, with the measures now in progress, professedly for the improvement of the metropolis.

The fire of London, which laid eighty-nine churches in ruins,—the fire of Hamburg, which lately destroyed the Church of St. Nicholas, an extensive edifice, nearly as large and as lofty as St. Paul's,—the fire which consumed the two Houses of Parliament, in which Westminster Hall escaped by miracle,—shew the importance of effecting a complete isolation of Westminster Abbey, by detaching it from the old and decayed buildings by which it is in part surrounded; while public convenience, and the architectural embellishment of our streets—both of which require a worthy approach to the tomb of kings, warriors, poets, and statesmen, and the seat of British legislature—point equally to the same object.

What stands in the way? The apathy (apparent at least) of a Committee of Taste sitting as a Metropolitan Improvement Commission; the natural obstructiveness of a chancellor of the exchequer upon all questions of ways and means not belonging to routine; and the cost of purchasing a mass of inferior third-rate houses and miserable tenements.

The houses in Snow-vents stand in the direct course of a straight line drawn between Buckingham Palace and the Victoria Tower of the new Houses of Parliament; a line which, if adopted for a new street, would isolate the abbey by bringing a roadway on the south side.

A plan for such an improvement was submitted to the commissioners a twelvemonth back, and is given in plan 3 of their third report, just published.†

It is dismissed with the following brief remarks:—

'The Society for Metropolitan Improvements submitted a plan, of which copy is appended, involving a total re-arrangement of the district. Her Majesty's commissioners have declined, therefore, to include the plan of the society in their inquiries.'

The reason assigned appears singularly inconclusive, for 'the total re-arrangement of such a district as lower Westminster' was almost, in the very terms of the commission, one of the objects for which it was appointed. The line proposed would have been a short one, entering the park near the Broadway, and thence proceeding to the palace through an avenue\* of trees. From the palace gates the Victoria Tower, 300 feet high, would have been visible as the termination of a grand vista, corresponding with that of the Champs Elysees and the Triumphal Arch of Napoleon, but superior in effect; and the cost of a line, thus forming a fitting connecting link between the residence of the monarch and the seat of popular representation, would not have been attended with a very serious expense. The cost, we believe, would have been less than that occasioned to the French by the removal of the column of Luxor, now standing in the Place de la Concorde; which was 100,000/.

Another line was at the same time proposed with the same eastern terminus, consisting of a modification of Mr. Wason's new street leading to Belgrave and Eaton squares; and the commissioners took a right view of the subject when they decided, that a thoroughfare in that direction was of more immediate importance to the public than an improvement upon the communication with Buckingham Palace already existing by way of Great George-street. They would have been fully justified in deferring the latter project: they were wrong in abandoning it; and they have put themselves still more in the wrong by adopting such a deviation from the plan as, if carried into effect, will render the complete isolation of Westminster Abbey for ever impracticable.

Mr. Wason's line is the proposed street to which we have before alluded; sanctioned by a committee of the House of Commons in 1832. As modified, it will be a street 80 feet wide, with a natural and excellent terminus at the upper end of the Vauxhall Bridge-road, leading to the new and fashionable suburbs of the south-west. So far all is well; but at the other end of the line, approaching Westminster Abbey, what have the commissioners done? To avoid the additional outlay required to purchase an old and dilapidated workhouse, held upon a lease which has but sixteen years to run, the commissioners have made the line crooked at its eastern extremity, cutting off the direct approach to the new Houses of Parliament, and building out of sight, to all persons passing down the line, both the Victoria Tower and Westminster Abbey.

Let us hear no more of taste in England. Love of art, reverence for its noblest monuments, respect for the dead, pride in the past, progress in the present, are sacrificed to a pseudo-utilitarianism; not that which Bentham loved, but scorned;—a rotten workhouse is weighed in the scale against the most sacred objects of British nationality, and the latter, in the estimation of a Metropolitan Improvement Commission, kick the beam!

When the intentions of the board became known the commissioners were urged by the Metropolitan Improvement Society to reconsider the plan in reference to the eastern terminus, with a view that nothing might be done to impede further and greater improvements in the vicinity of the abbey; however long they might be delayed. The application was unsuccessful. The society then forwarded to the commissioners a new plan, accompanied with a sketch shewing the abbey as it would appear on the south side, with the cloisters, chapter-house, and other parts of the old cathedral restored, if the abbey were isolated as proposed, by a roadway carried entirely round the edifice; but the commissioners again declined to reopen the question, on the ground that a definite engagement had been entered into with the promoters of the bill now before the house, which could not be honourably broken. The society might have replied, that the practical part of this question is not one of keeping or breaking engagement, but simply of money. We will answer for Mr. Wason and his friends that they, at least, will be willing to re-open the question, if the Government will re-open its exchequer.

The abbey is now chiefly seen from the north; a view of the southern elevation would

\* The whole of the abbey and palace precinct, south of Pall Mall, was called by the Normans, "Thorney Island and tout le champ." From the latter phrase Mr. Hardwell derives the word Tot-hill. As there is no hill near the Abbey Tot-hill Street would be a misnomer, but it is certainly not at all improbable that the French phrase of *tout le champ* was first clipped into *tout le* and then corrupted into *tout le* and *Tot-hill*. In like manner the favourite Norman sign of Boulogne Mouth became the Bull and Mouth; *L'enguille* of *Als* was corrupted into the Eagle and Child; and the more classical sign of the Nasty and Bechani was ultimately changed into the Devil and Bag of Nails.

\* The *pis* was the box for the consecrated host.

† Hansard, price 5s.

\* This is not properly shown by the plan published in the report, which, as coloured, makes the road appear as an encroachment upon the park.